

Women's Representations from Radical Naturalism to the New Woman Response

A Transatlantic Perspective of European, Latin American,
and American Narratives

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Table of Contents

	Acknowledgments	v
	Introduction.	
	The Atlantic Basin and Views of Woman in the Nineteenth Century	vii
	Theoretical and Philosophical Framework	xi
	From Radical Naturalism to the New Woman Response	xiv
	Issues in Translations	xvii
	The Comparative Literature Field	xviii
	Corpus Justification	xix
	Geographic Scope, Biographical Background and Plot Summaries	xx
	Chapter Summaries	xxv
Chapter 1	Women Across the Atlantic: Perspectives of Radical Naturalism and the New Woman Response	1
	Definitions	1
	Framework	2
	Criticism	5
	<i>Santa</i>	6
	“Tío Terrones”	13
	<i>La hija del bandido</i>	19
	<i>La piedra angular</i>	22
	<i>The Awakening</i>	28
	<i>Tess of the D’Urbervilles</i>	32
	<i>Ideala</i>	35
	Conclusion	38

Chapter 2	Women throughout Alternative Spaces and Liminality in Mexican, Spanish, American and British Literatures	41
	Definitions	41
	Framework	42
	Criticism	43
	The House, the Inn, the Cave, the Brothel, and the Countryside	46
	<i>The Inn in Tess</i>	46
	<i>The Countryside in Tess</i>	49
	<i>The Cave in La hija</i>	52
	<i>The House in The Awakening</i>	55
	<i>The House in La gota de sangre</i>	55
	<i>La Peña in La gota de sangre</i>	58
	<i>The Countryside and The House Santa</i>	60
	<i>The Brothel in Santa</i>	62
	Liminality	67
	Conclusion	70
Chapter 3	Santa and Tess of the D'Urbervilles: Eugenics, Alcoholism, and Social Darwinism	73
	Definitions	74
	Framework	75
	Criticism	77
	Eugenics, Atavisms and Social Darwinism in <i>Tess</i> and <i>Santa</i>	78
	Alcoholism	91
	Conclusion	100
	Conclusion	103
	Work Cited	109
	Index	117

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Introduction.

The Atlantic Basin and Views of Woman in the Nineteenth Century

The Atlantic Basin is a natural barrier that, once crossed by Europeans, facilitated a series of human contacts rich in transcendental transformations (Thornton 7). Pre- and post-Columbus voyages through the Atlantic were many in number and from different places. They produced continual clashes between world views that influenced and transformed cultures, politics, and history around the world (Thornton 7-8). Navigation through the Atlantic Basin can be marked as early as the thirteenth century, not only by Scandinavians but also by Caribbean inhabitants and later by the Portuguese in their travels to Africa (Thornton 8). From that point in time to the end of the nineteenth century, control of the Atlantic Basin marked the rise and fall of imperial and colonial rules, a significant element for European development. The forced immigration of Africans by Europeans is the darkest example in human history of the cruel colonial transatlantic power on the American continent. This inhuman and transformative practice lasted almost to the early twentieth century (Klein xv).

During the *fin de siècle*, the interest of European empires not only focused on economic growth but also promoted travelers, explorers, and writers in search of scientific, social, and geographical discoveries. These people were usually from England, the United States, or Spain. They crossed the Atlantic for various reasons (Guelke and Morint 306). Transatlantic travel in the nineteenth century was an explosive display of technical, scientific, social, racial, and political changes and perspectives. Literature and science marked many of these advances all over the world and formed a prevailing knowledge highlighting differences among human beings. Women were often the object of a negative differentiation echoed through many disciplines. European, North American and Latin American patriarchal literary works developed and depicted treacherous female characters, which early feminists responded to with creative strategies of opposition. The works analyzed in this book represent not only the reflection of the nineteenth-century view of women as biologically, psychologically, morally, hereditarily, and spiritually different from men but also the mechanisms of repression that helped to maintain these ideas as well as anti-establishment mechanisms that refuted them. By establishing a conversation among these works from different perspectives, this book reveals how deeply rooted the patriarchal intentions to control many aspects of

women were and how the New Woman writers reacted to it. These authors intentionally deconstructed the patriarchal model with strong arguments, debunking its substantive theories and positions from science to the political arena. These theoretical positions still resonate today and allow connections to contemporary literature.

This thesis, then, comparatively interprets representations of women within Radical Naturalism and New Woman perspectives from both sides of the Atlantic Basin. Hence, it argues metatheoretically that different constructions of female characters established a gendered dialogue through the themes of the *femme fatale*, alternative spaces, eugenics, and social Darwinism. Despite multiple locations, various languages, and different genders of authorship, the texts of both literary perspectives analyzed here converge in depicting women as submissive victims within patriarchal institutions such as the state, family, or society. However, whereas Radical Naturalism tends to create regressive characters that fall into marginal places, sickness, and death, the New Woman perspective tends to create progressive characters, allowing them to be successful and healthy with an alternative path. The novels that are selected to illustrate this thesis are as follows: *Santa* (1903), by Federico Gamboa from Mexico, *La hija del bandido o los subterráneos del nevado* (1887), by Refugio Barragán de Toscano from Mexico; *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (1891), by Thomas Hardy from Great Britain; *Ideala* (1888), by Sarah Grand from Great Britain; *The Awakening* (1899), by Kate Chopin from the United States; and *La gota de sangre* (1911), *La piedra angular* (1891), and the short story "Tío Terrones" (1920), by Emilia Pardo Bazán from Spain.

Before moving to the analysis of these novels, it might be useful to explain and define some key terms deployed throughout this work. The term Naturalism was coined by Emile Zola, who suggested that writers need to express different perspectives on society as one would do in a scientific study. In their works, these writers generally focus on negative aspects of life and/or marginalities of all kinds to portray mostly female characters as marginal individuals (Ordiz 8). Radical Naturalism refers to an extreme version of naturalistic narrative, as Pura Fernández explains in her "Introducción" to *La prostituta (Novela medico-social)* (1884). The term was made by the Spanish writer Alejandro Sawa to describe a narrative that was also called the brothel novel, *barricada* [barricade], or *novela medico-social* [medico-social novel], as Fernández points out. This narrative usually has social, political, and medical perspectives and tends to bring all the events to the extreme, affecting the main character, often a woman. The New Woman was a literary and social trend in the 1890s (Rich 1). In her book *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism*, Ann Heilmann defines this concept as follows:

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Index

A

- Africa, vii, 4, 56, 76, 86
alcohol, xxvi, 27, 32, 47, 74, 77, 78,
91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99,
101, 102, 104, 106
Alcoholism, 73, 91, 113, 115
American studies, xi
Argentina, xx, 107
Atavism, ix
Atlantic, vii, viii, x, xi, xvii, xix, xx,
xxv, 1, 4, 29, 39, 42, 50, 71, 76, 82,
86, 100, 102, 104, 107, 115
Atlantic Basin, vii, viii, x, xi, xii, xix,
xx, 82, 100, 102, 104, 107

B

- Barragán de Toscano Refugio
Barragán de Toscano, xi, xv,
xviii, xxi, xxv, 5, 6, 21, 27, 38,
71, 89, 105, 106
Refugio Barragán de Toscano,
viii, xv, xxi, 1, 39, 41
barricada, viii
Benjamin Walter
Walter Benjamin, xvii
bio-power, ix, 11, 74, 75, 82, 97
Borges Jorge Luis
Jorge Luis Borges, xvii
Bourdieu Pierre
Bourdieu, xiv, 62, 90, 96, 109
Pierre Bourdieu, xiv, 76
British Empire, xx, 76, 78, 86
Brothel, 46, 62
Brushwood John

- Brushwood, 2, 110
John Brushwood, 2

C

- Caribbean, vii, 76, 86
Chopin Kate
Chopin, x, xi, xvi, xviii, xix, xxiv,
xxv, 5, 6, 28, 31, 38, 39, 45, 71,
103, 105, 106, 110, 112, 116
Kate Chopin, viii, xvi, xx, xxiv, 1,
39, 41, 106, 112
comparative literature, xi, xvii,
xviii, xix
Cooppan Vilashini
Cooppan, xviii, xix, 110
Vilashini Cooppan, xviii
Crime, ix, xxii, 41, 113
criminalization, x, 44, 75
Cuba, xx

D

- Darwin Charles
Charles Darwin, 73, 109
Deleuze Gilles
Deleuze, xi, 110
Deviancy, ix, 42
Díaz Porfirio
Porfirio Díaz, xx, 2, 7
Dijkstra Bram
Bram Dijkstra, xvi, 43
Dijkstra Bram, xvi, 24, 25, 39, 50,
62, 69, 89, 90, 110
discourse, ix, x, xvi, xx, 6, 11, 12,
26, 29, 44, 49, 62, 67, 75, 78, 83,
84, 90, 91, 97, 98, 100, 101, 102

E

England, vii, xvi, xx, xxiii, 1, 2, 6,
28, 29, 32, 33, 39, 42, 45, 50, 64,
75, 78, 81, 83, 86, 90, 91, 97, 101,
103
estabilidad y progreso, xx, 2
eugenic, 73
European, vii, 3, 7, 76

F

femme fatale, viii, x, xxv, 1, 2, 5, 6,
9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 27,
30, 35, 37, 38, 39, 104, 105, 106
Fernández Pura
Pura Fernández, viii, 1
fin de siècle, vii, xii, xvi, xx, 1, 4, 6,
19, 39, 41, 42, 52, 58, 63, 73, 76,
77, 82, 83, 85, 91, 96, 100
Foucault Michel
Foucault, ix, x, xii, xiii, xiv, 2, 3,
7, 9, 12, 36, 39, 43, 48, 51, 65,
74, 75, 111
Frye Northrop
Frye, xi, 43, 54, 111
Northrop Frye, xi, 43, 49

G

Gamboa, ix, x, xi, xiv, xv, xviii, xix,
xx, xxi, xxv, xxvi, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11,
12, 21, 27, 30, 31, 32, 38, 39, 44,
60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 73, 77, 78, 86,
87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 94, 95, 96, 97,
100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106,
111, 116
Gamboa Federico
Federico Gamboa, viii, xvi, xix,
1, 38, 41, 73, 77, 86, 89, 90,
110, 114, 115
Gennep Van Arnol

Van Arnol Gennep, 43

Giles Paul

Giles, xi, xii, 4, 39, 76, 110, 111
Paul Giles, xii, 4, 42, 76

Grand Sarah

Grand, x, xi, xv, xviii, xix, xxiii, 6,
29, 35, 36, 37, 39, 83, 103, 106,
111, 112
Sarah Grand, viii, xv, xx, xxiii, 1,
5, 6, 29, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 83,
91, 106, 111, 112, 113

Great Britain, viii, xii, xx, 1, 4, 6, 13,
33, 41, 42, 46, 49, 52, 73, 78, 86,
91, 93, 99, 100, 104

Guam, xx

Guattari Félix

Guattari, xi, 110

H

Hardy Thomas

Hardy, ix, x, xi, xviii, xix, xxiii,
xxiv, xxv, xxvi, 6, 32, 33, 34, 35,
39, 45, 46, 47, 49, 50, 51, 68,
71, 73, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83,
84, 85, 87, 89, 91, 92, 94, 100,
101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106,
109, 111, 112, 114, 115, 116
Thomas Hardy, viii, xx, xxiii, 1, 5,
32, 38, 39, 41, 45, 46, 73, 77,
78, 83, 97, 106, 109, 111, 112,
113, 114, 115, 116

heterotopia, 52, 62, 65, 70, 105

heterotopic spaces, xiii, 60, 65, 104

hierarchical observations, xii

I

Ideala, viii, xx, xxiii, xxv, 1, 6, 35,
36, 37, 38, 103, 106, 111

J

- Jakobson Roman
 Jakobson, 113
 Roman Jakobson, xvii
 Julia Fernandina, 56, 57, 58, 62, 68,
 105

K

- Kurosawa Akira
 Akira Kurosawa, xix

L

- La gota de sangre*, viii, xxii, 13, 41,
 44, 55, 58, 63, 68, 71, 103, 114
 La hija del Bandido
 La hija, viii, xv, xix, xxi, xxv, 1, 5,
 19, 38, 41, 43, 50, 51, 52, 55,
 60, 63, 69, 70, 89, 106, 109, 116
La piedra angular, viii, xxii, xxv, 1,
 13, 21, 22, 27, 31, 38, 114
La prostituta, viii, 6, 12, 97, 111,
 113
 Latin American, vii, 7, 39, 44, 65,
 67, 70, 76, 86, 90, 107, 113
letrado, 62, 65, 90, 96
 Liminality, 41, 67, 68
 Lombroso Cesare
 Cesare Lombroso, xiv, 74, 75,
 113
 Lombroso, xiv, 3, 73, 75, 77, 78,
 80, 81, 88, 90, 93, 97, 100, 101,
 113
 López Bago Eduardo
 Eduardo López Bago, 6, 7, 97,
 107
 Louisiana, xxiv, xxv, 5, 28, 45, 69,
 112, 114, 115

M

- Macbeth*, xix
 Manning Susan
 Manning, xi, 4, 113
 Susan Manning, xi, 4, 39, 109,
 110, 113, 116
 Mexico, viii, xx, xxi, 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9,
 13, 19, 21, 32, 38, 39, 41, 42, 44,
 60, 62, 63, 65, 73, 74, 77, 78, 86,
 91, 94, 97, 99, 100, 103, 104, 105,
 109, 114, 115
 Moi Toril
 Moi, xvi, 3, 39, 43, 60, 114
 Toril Moi, xvi, 2, 9, 21, 30, 32, 43,
 55, 69

N

- Naturalism, viii, x, xvi, xxv, xxvi, 2,
 5, 11, 12, 14, 17, 19, 22, 27, 28,
 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 41,
 44, 47, 58, 75, 86, 91, 92, 103,
 106, 109, 113, 114
 New Orleans, xxiv
 New Woman, viii, ix, x, xiv, xv, xvi,
 xx, xxv, 1, 2, 5, 12, 13, 15, 17, 21,
 27, 28, 30, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38,
 39, 41, 48, 55, 58, 72, 73, 78, 83,
 85, 86, 91, 94, 97, 103, 104, 106,
 107, 110, 112, 113, 115, 116
 normalization, xii, 2
 normalizing judgment, xii, 2, 9
 North American, vii
novela medico-social, viii

P

- Pardo Bazán Emilia
 Emilia Pardo Bazán, viii, xv, xx,
 xxi, 1, 5, 13, 26, 39, 41, 56, 106,
 111, 115

- Pardo Bazán, x, xi, xiii, xv, xviii, xix, xxii, xxv, 5, 6, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 27, 28, 38, 44, 45, 56, 58, 59, 71, 103, 105, 106, 109, 111, 114
- Pizer John
John Pizer, xviii
- porfiriato*, xx, xxvi, 2, 62, 63, 65, 94
- prostitution, ix, xv, xxi, xxiii, 12, 19, 38, 44, 45, 46, 52, 57, 58, 62, 63, 70, 80, 88, 89, 93, 96, 98, 100, 101, 103, 105
- Puerto Rico, xx
- R**
- Radical Naturalism, viii, ix, x, xiv, xv, xvi, xix, xx, xxv, 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 21, 27, 37, 38, 41, 44, 49, 58, 60, 67, 72, 75, 77, 86, 91, 97, 99, 103, 105
- Rama Angel
Angel Rama, 12
Rama, 114
- S**
- Said Edward
Edward Said, 43, 76, 86
Said, 86, 109, 115
- Santa*, viii, x, xii, xiii, xix, xxi, xxv, xxvi, 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 21, 30, 31, 32, 38, 41, 43, 44, 50, 55, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 70, 72, 73, 74, 77, 78, 87, 88, 89, 94, 95, 98, 99, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 109, 110, 111, 114, 115, 116
- Sawa Alejandro
Alejandro Sawa, viii
- Shakespeare, xix
- Slettedahl Heidi
Slettedahl, xi, xii, 4, 39, 115
- social Darwinism, viii, ix, x, xxvi, 24, 67, 72, 74, 78, 86, 93, 96, 100, 101, 102, 104, 107
- Spain, vii, viii, xv, xx, xxii, 1, 3, 4, 6, 13, 15, 16, 19, 25, 28, 38, 39, 41, 42, 44, 58, 62, 63, 75, 76, 90, 97, 100, 104, 107, 109, 116
- Spanish Empire, xx
- Spencer Herbert
Herbert Spencer, ix, 74
- T**
- Taylor Andrew
Andrew Taylor, xi, 4, 39, 109, 110, 113, 116
Taylor, xi, 4, 113
- Tess of the D'Ubervilles
Tess, viii, x, xiii, xx, xxiv, xxv, xxvi, 1, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38, 41, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 55, 68, 71, 72, 73, 74, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 84, 85, 89, 91, 92, 93, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 109, 112, 114, 115
- The Awakening*, viii, xvi, xx, xxiv, xxv, 1, 5, 28, 38, 41, 45, 55, 69, 109, 110, 112
- the United States, vii, viii, xi, xviii, xx, xxiii, 1, 4, 6, 13, 28, 29, 32, 39, 41, 42, 64, 76, 86, 90, 94, 97, 104
- Tío Terrones
"Tío Terrones", viii, xiii, 13, 15, 38, 103
- Transatlantic, vii, ix, xi, xvi, xvii, xix, xx, 2, 4, 5, 39, 76, 77, 94, 104, 109, 110, 111, 113, 115, 116
- Tsuchiya Akiko
Akiko Tsuchiya, 3
Tsuchiya, 3, 8, 25, 39, 58, 75, 116

V

Violence, 96

W

World War II, xviii

Z

Zola Émil

Zola, viii, xiv, xv, xxvi, 1, 2, 6, 7,
10, 22, 33, 34, 35, 62, 78, 91,
106, 116